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Daffodils and dragons: the Welsh challenge for sustainability and equity

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Abstract

Aim

The aim of this paper is to discuss research focusing on the role of strategic planning as a vehicle for sustainability and equity across the Welsh higher education sector. Outcomes of analysis include response times to government initiatives, and the conceptualisation and development of a ‘sustainability maturity model’ to facilitate effective implementation of ‘education for sustainable development and global citizenship’ in Welsh higher education institutions.

Background

Sustainable development, tackling social justice and equal opportunities have structured the work of the Welsh Assembly Government since its formation in 1999. Consequently, the past ten years have witnessed many Welsh Assembly Government strategies and policies prioritising sustainability and equity. For example, the Sustainable Development Charter (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010) requires organisations to embed sustainable development as their central organising principle in everything they do.

The higher education sector launches the careers of future leaders, designers and innovators. Therefore, addressing the lack of understanding of the concept of sustainability within higher education is imperative if society is to become more equitable and sustainable (Orr, 1994: Martin and Jucker, 2003: Sibbel, 2009). The Welsh Assembly Government has commissioned several initiatives to drive sustainability within the education sector in Wales and specifically across higher education institutions. A recent report highlighted gaps in the appraisal of the mechanism of corporate planning and incorporating sustainable development into mission statements, strategic plans and policies (Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, 2009).

Research

This research reflects the challenge underway in Wales where sustainable development and global citizenship are perceived with equal worth. Strategic planning in higher education is a tool to implement change and in analysing the common ground among Welsh higher education institutions effective processes, goals and actions can be identified and consequently shape the delivery of education for a more sustainable and equitable society. The potential framework for delivery is an adaptation from the arena of project management, the capability maturity model. It is possible that by enhancing policies and actions already existing across higher education planning and management, via the proposed 'sustainability maturity model', institutions will be supported to advance the challenge of sustainability and equity effectively.

Keywords: Equity, Global Citizenship, Higher Education, Strategic Planning, Sustainability, Wales.

Introduction

The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) advocates the crucial role of higher education globally in engaging with sustainability and globalisation issues (UNESCO, 2010). The Welsh Assembly Government, the devolved government for Wales since 1999, is unique with its endorsement of sustainable development and equity at the core of all its operations. For instance, the Government of Wales Act states that ministers may undertake appropriate decisions and actions to promote or improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of Wales (Office of Public Sector Information, 2006, p.35). As a result, strategies and policies emerging from the Welsh Assembly Government prioritise sustainability and equity for all organisations and people across Wales.

Welsh higher education institutions perform an important role in delivering such objectives, via requirements directed through the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales. The sector aims to drive for effective sustainability and equity, thus fulfilling a vital role for higher education (Orr, 1994; Cortese, 1999; Tilbury, 2004; Gough and Scott, 2007). As Cortese pointed out higher education institutions 'are significant leverage points which both reflect and inform social mindsets' (Cortese, 1999, p.9). Therefore the potential for higher education to lead the way in modelling sustainability and equity should be embraced and as it is those with qualifications that are leading society down the 'unsustainable route,' something needs to change (Cortese, 2003, p.16; Orr, 1994, p.8).

The Welsh Agenda

Across the United Kingdom, including Wales, higher education institutions have increasingly elected to participate in measuring sustainability performances via such practices as the People and Planet Green League Table, which ranks universities according to their sustainability actions, and the Green Gown Awards, which recognises sustainability initiatives in colleges and universities. The Welsh Assembly Government has specifically targeted the role of education in striving for a sustainable and equitable society. The publication of *Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship – A Strategy for Action* (2006), along with its updates (2008 and 2009) provide all the education sectors with a structure to address the agenda.

Figure 1 illustrates some important developments for the sustainability agenda in Wales and specifically the higher education sector. It is essential to note that the Welsh Assembly Government has adopted a unique stance in using the terminology; Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC). The United Nations, Europe, England and Scotland use 'Education for Sustainable Development', making no specific reference to global citizenship in the title. A key element of the sustainability and equity debate is the local community, within which a higher education institution finds itself and it is imperative that engagement is positive and the obligation the university has to 'model environmental sustainability' must not be underestimated (Corcoran and Wals, 2004, p.4). More recently Goddard (2009) brought this issue to the forefront in his discussion about 'civic universities' and their responsibility to engage with society. Even though 'citizenship' does not appear to have as much prominence in the literature as 'environmental' within the concept of sustainability, some have constantly emphasised the importance of 'what it means to be a citizen' (Orr, 1994, p.32; O'Riordan and Voisey, 1998). Such arguments stress the relevance of the 'equity' element of the sustainability agenda and thus the Welsh Assembly Government are at the forefront of such initiatives.

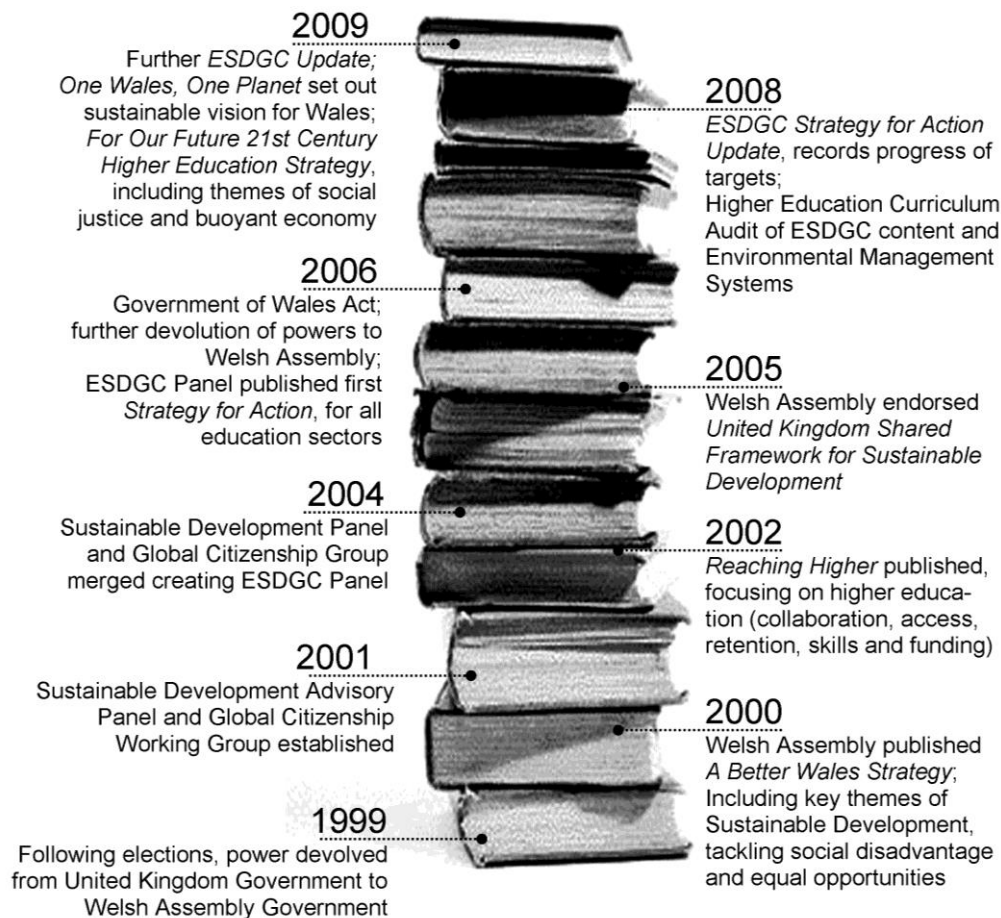


Figure 1. Important dates for Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) in Wales (Diniz and Glover, 2010, p.65).

Proposed Sustainability Maturity Model

Strategic planning in higher education provides the general direction of travel for an institution. However, detail does vary from specific aspirations to much broader flexible aims. A recent report drew attention to the fact that there are gaps in the appraisal of the mechanism of corporate planning and incorporating sustainable development into mission statements, strategic plans and policies (Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, 2009, p.17). Strategic plans are a tool with which to implement change and by examining the common ground among several institutions it is suggested that effective processes, goals and actions can be identified and consequently the shaping of a higher education sector which demonstrates effective sustainability and equitable actions. It is proposed that by analysing the content of individual higher education institution's Strategic Plans it will be possible to identify key areas for identifying the goals, which will lead to improving practices, and ultimately a progression towards sustainable maturity.

Change management and project management within organisations form large and diverse fields of theories and practices. Key elements of such theories and practices involve the role of people within the process and their resistance to change. Some believe that change is continuous, as processes and practices are updated (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997), as opposed to being revolutionary in nature (Gersick, 1991; Romanelli and Tushman, 1994) and 'punctuating the equilibrium' (Parsons and Fidler, 2005). The purpose of this research is to look beyond the theory of change and propose practical measures to advance the effectiveness of sustainability across higher education institutions.

In this instance it is proposed that the Capability Maturity Model (Paulk et al. 1993) be adapted from its original utilisation within the software industry. The Capability Maturity Model has been modified many times to address specific business models or industry contexts (Brookes and Clarke, 2009); demonstrating adaptability and flexibility in application. The maturity process applies five levels through which an organisation progresses in its drive to optimise outputs. In order to advance through the levels 'process areas' require 'specific' and 'generic' 'goals' and 'practices' to be achieved successfully. Ultimately risk reduces with the progression and predictability rises, as Figure 2 demonstrates (Persse, 2001).

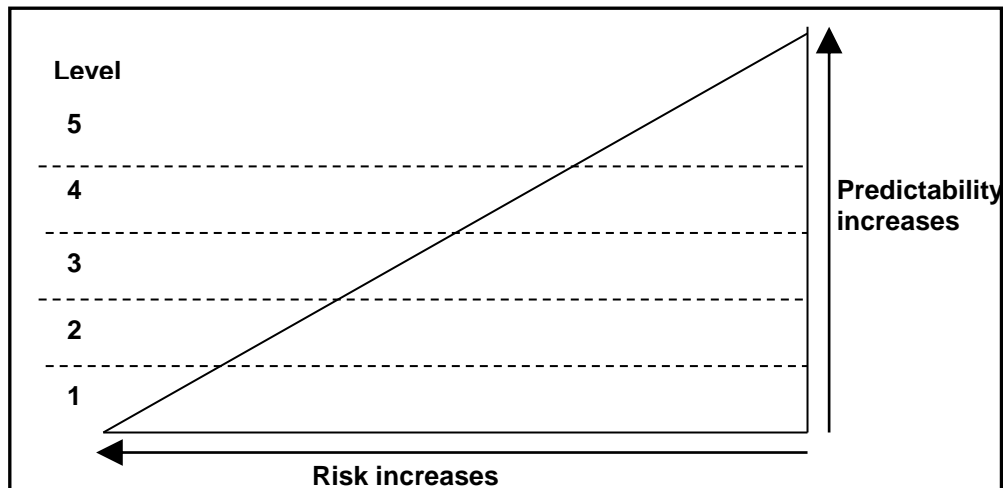


Figure 2. Risk falls and predictability increases as an organisation moves through the maturity levels (Persse, 2001).

Research Methodology

To determine the key areas of focus three years of strategic plans from Welsh higher education institutions are analysed to identify common themes both across institutions and over time. The rationale for this approach is that objectives and themes already prioritised within a strategic plan should reflect precedence towards commitment and action, as opposed to imposing a totally unfamiliar framework upon a system. The aim is to achieve a thorough understanding of the situation in a meaningful way with the ‘human-as-instrument’ in the collection and analysis of data (Maykut and Morehouse, 1995, p.26). Such a qualitative approach is an inductive process, working up from the data and consequently constructing the theory. In this case analysing documents uncovers themes, categories and patterns which can be applied to a potentially effective model.

Initially categories selected for coding developed from the theory of policy and strategy development and implementation (Cerych and Sabatier, 1986); reflecting variables considered imperative to such processes. To some extent this does not represent a true ‘grounded theory’ approach, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) originally proposed starting without any preconceptions and working up from the raw data allowing for substantive theory development (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.114). Yet later Strauss and Corbin prefer to identify themes, as opposed to allowing for their emergence from the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Douglas, 2004, p.146). Others refer to few researchers being absolutely strict about ‘keeping out theoretical presuppositions at the start of analysis’ (Gibbs, 2002,

p.166) and researchers come to projects with some ideas for the starting point for the phenomena to be searched (Gibbs, 2007, p.46). As a result it is deemed appropriate that pre-determined themes are accompanied with sustainability and equity specific themes and as coding progresses themes also emerge from the text and are added. This approach has resulted in a complex and thorough coding process ensuring detailed analysis.

Results

The following provides comment regarding analysis of the strategic plans from all Welsh higher education institutions from 2007 – 2009. Those selected for inclusion illustrate some of the key areas of focus for institutions to progress with effective sustainability and equity actions and will inform the creation of the sustainability maturity model.

Strategic plans include many general sweeping statements regarding students and present institutional aims to improve marketing, retention, inclusivity and student satisfaction. For example Bangor University identify a First Year Student Experience Enhancement Project (Bangor University, 2009, p.4) with Cardiff University highlighting.... ‘over 7,000 students graduate from Cardiff University each year and latest Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) figures show that 94% of our graduates from first degrees enter employment or professional training/postgraduate study shortly after graduating.’ (Cardiff University, 2009, p.19)

A minority of plans attempt to provide a broader picture, for instance Cardiff University refer to links with the National Students’ Union and Glyndŵr University state more support for clubs and societies. Both comments reflect a more holistic view of the student experience in higher education, providing an expansion of the employability theme and one of high student achievement to encompass other influences. This belief may prove invaluable for a holistic delivery of an effective sustainability and equity agenda. Almost a third of the University of Glamorgan’s 2009 Strategic Plan referred to the student in some way, with a large proportion of text providing indicators of performance currently and future targets. However, these indicators are predominantly related to participation figures, employability rates and pass rates as opposed to satisfaction and student well being. Nevertheless, entrepreneurship and employability attributes receive much attention within all the strategic plans. However, Welsh higher education institutions apply different measures to indicate progress within this field.

The staff of an institution are a key resource and important stakeholder in higher education. Without exception all strategic plans recognise the importance of developing and supporting staff. However, there are differences in future goals cited by some institutions. Some prioritise recruiting staff with high calibre research profiles or the ability to speak Welsh, whereas others emphasise an intention to improve staff participation in sport, recreation and volunteering activities. These differences are more evident in recent plans, reflecting increasing awareness of well-being and although the proportion of staff with doctorates is viewed as an indicator of esteem, information regarding staff improving well-being and health appears to be gaining momentum. This could provide a platform for further focused sustainability and equity actions to be incorporated across all institutions.

The above precedence for 'active citizenship' via volunteering actions also manifests itself across the student body, with some institutions promoting their volunteering organisations. Cardiff University comments that its forty student-run community projects contribute £1 million to the local economy and annually 81,000 hours of volunteer work is completed (Cardiff University, 2009, p.19). The above illustrations provide a clear indication of a statement of intent, action and a measureable indicator. However, consistency across the strategic plans is not evident and thus presents clear possibilities for structuring measures not only within an institution but across Wales. This would signify clear evidence of local actions regarding 'active citizenship' and provide consistency across the Welsh higher education sector.

Aberystwyth University and Cardiff University clarify their obvious role within all communities (local, regional, national and global). Other institutions place greater emphasis on their role within the local community; Trinity College Carmarthen and University of Wales, Newport adopt the term 'community university' and place their main focus on their local region of Wales. Glyndŵr University and Swansea University both stress public engagement with the regional community as key. Swansea Metropolitan University (SMU) provides particular evidence of positive engagement within the local community. 'A number of SMU staff and Governors serve the community in an individual capacity (with SMU's full support) as local councillors, members of Health Trusts, JPs, school and FE governors and as active participants in local charitable, social, sporting and voluntary organisations.' (Swansea Metropolitan University, 2009, p.16) Such comment,

although not providing concrete figures of community involvement, as Cardiff University does, could offer a possible measure for such actions from an institution if accurate data could be collected to evidence the statement.

The examples cited above also provide evidence of institutions striving to fulfil one of the priorities of the Welsh Assembly Government to improve social well-being, and all strategic plans endeavour to align themselves with the Assembly's priorities. This is perhaps not surprising considering the substantial amount of funding, for the ten Welsh higher education institutions, which originates from the public purse (£356 million for 2010/11). Consequently, it is imperative that policies and initiatives established by the Assembly are responded to efficiently. In an effort to determine a response time by institutions all Welsh Assembly Government strategies and policies mentioned in strategic plans are examined. Of particular interest is the Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) – Strategy for Action, institutions react with different speed to the proposed measures and actions, as evidenced in strategic plans.

Four of the eleven (Lampeter and Carmarthen have since merged) Welsh higher education institutions cited the ESDGC – Strategy for Action (2006) in their 2007 strategic plans, with five including it in 2008 and only three citing it in 2009. However, several institutions repeatedly refer to the document over the years and five institutions make no direct reference to this ESDGC strategy. This provides an indication of a response time, for some, of one to two years, but the lack of reference by several may cause the Welsh Assembly Government concern regarding the note taken by higher education institutions of their requirements at the planning stage. This pattern also emerges when other Welsh Assembly strategies are examined. For example, the One Wales Spatial Plan published in 2007 is acknowledged by three institutions in 2008 and seven by 2009. More recently the Jones Review of Higher Education (2008) saw seven institutions cite the document one year after publication. So, although there appears to be the expected response time of the next round of strategies by way of reacting to government initiatives it is by no means consistent across all the Welsh higher education institutions. There is the possibility of further research within this context, as reasons for the speed of adherence to strategies and policies are of relevance across many sectors.

Since 2007 there has been a steady increase in the proportion of the strategic plans focusing on sustainability and equity issues. However, there are exceptions to this; for

instance, Swansea University's 2007 plan devotes much text to explaining its Environmental Management System plans. It also briefly identifies programmes of study that target related issues and its active role in the Assembly's climate change consultations. The 2008 plan reiterates the aim to implement a sustainable development policy, including an environmental management system but not in the detail evident in 2007. By 2009 research relevant to the sustainability agenda is promoted but nothing else and this is by far Swansea's lengthiest plan (almost twice as long as previous plans).

As mentioned, this trend is reversed by many other institutions, as they increase the attention to the sustainability agenda over time in their plans. However, it could be interpreted that issues exist in strategy and it takes time for these to become autonomous. Once this happens then there is no need to focus on the issues, the agenda moves on and new emerging matters receive attention. A clear example of this is the University of Glamorgan who were the first the first University in the United Kingdom to be ISO 14001 accredited and 2007 and 2008 Strategic Plans see them citing their commitment to maintaining this standard. However, by 2009 no mention appears in their Strategic Plan, the issue may be now perceived as being embedded and assumed as fact. If such embedding is to prove the case, issues will move from the main strategies through to sub strategies; such as the Learning and Teaching Strategy and eventually receive attention in department and programme documentation and result in action. This possible trail of evidence needs to be explored.

Leadership and approaches to management have a major role in successful development and implementation of strategies and policies and this has been particularly identified as a requirement for successful Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) delivery (Dawe, Jucker and Martin, 2005, p.85; Welsh Assembly Government, 2006, p.33). However, only Aberystwyth University focus on the integrated role of ESDGC within their planning, aiming to identify best practices and monitor activities (University of Aberystwyth, 2009, p.36)

Such evidence in the planning processes presents clear attempts to embed ESDGC. Key to developing an effective transformation process is the discovery as to the reason for only one institution to have such clear statements regarding embedding within planning. It is worthy to note that within the ESDGC theme of coding Aberystwyth University ranked mid way for all the Welsh 2009 Strategic Plans in the proportion of text referring the

ESDGC, yet the content of this coding concentrates on strategically incorporating ESDGC across the whole institution.

Conclusion

There are many drivers for effective sustainability and equity within the higher education sector in Wales. The sector is uniquely poised to progress the agenda, being pushed with directives from the Welsh Assembly Government and such issues as league table positions, which appear to influence marketing and student recruitment. Findings of the analysis of all Welsh higher education strategic plans demonstrate areas receiving attention at the planning stage. However, by comparing across institutions, and over time within an institution, it is possible to identify priorities and existing gaps in implementation, as presented above regarding the role and importance of staff within an institution for instance and the integration of sustainability across all actions within an institution. It is by analysing and interpreting these findings that proposals for the sustainability maturity model's actions, goals and practices will be developed. A crucial element of the research provides a collation of 'good practices' within the Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) field, thus fulfilling a recommendation by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (2009, p.52). For examples of Welsh case studies focusing on sustainability and equity issues see Diniz and Glover, 2010.

The future of sustainability and equity across the Welsh higher education sector appears to be gaining momentum as requirements from the Welsh Assembly Government drive the agenda from the 'top'. However, this must be accompanied with a push from the 'bottom' if there is to be sustained activity and progress. This research provides evidence of such progress and the current network of ten higher education institutions across Wales are an accessible and manageable group to achieve effective advances with this agenda using a collective and collaborative approach. As a result, Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government and the higher education sector are poised to present world-leading initiatives regarding effective sustainability and equity.

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